



The Dread POETS Society

“Hey Pete. A few of us are going for drinks after work,” Rosie said as she stuck her frizzy head through the door to Pete’s little office.

“After that inspiring meeting this morning, that’s just the sort of action plan I can get behind,” Pete said.

“Rocky and Bullwinkle’s?”

“Perfect. I’ll see you in an hour.”

Rocky and Bullwinkle’s was your typical roadhouse/restaurant/bar. It was just down the street from NMTS. Its theme and interior were loosely based on the old Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon series.

Harold, Rosie, and Damali were already seated at a back corner table when Pete got there. He was surprised to see Damali. She hadn’t said anything at the morning meeting and didn’t normally socialize outside the office. Everyone respected her brisk efficiency and cool competency – especially since she had so quickly cleaned up the accounting mess she had been hired to fix.

“... he’s going to pull down the whole division if something isn’t done,” Damali was saying with a passion and frankness Pete hadn’t realized she could muster. “If the division goes, the whole company is gone.”

Harold moved aside and pushed back a chair for Pete. “We’re chatting about our delightful leader and his latest trail of destruction,” he said with a weary grin.

“He’s really killing us. And it’s pulling down the morale of the whole division,” Damali said, staring right at Pete.

“Welcome to this week’s POETS meeting, Pete,” Rosie said. “We’re just beginning to compose.” Rosie called their after-work drinks the *Piss-On-Everything-Till-Sunrise Society*, or POETS, for short.

Harold loved worn-out clichés and aphorisms. “This morning’s meeting was yet another triumphant installment in the continuing saga that is the leadership lunacy of NMTS,” he said. “The one who blows his horn loudest is most often in the fog.”

Damali looked at Pete. “The list of projects that came out this morning is unbelievable. I knew we had a lot on our plates, but I had no idea the list was sooooo long. Did you?”

“Operations is involved in many of these projects, so I had a pretty good idea,” Pete said. “But I didn’t see the big picture until today.”

“I remember when you used to sort through all the conflicting priorities to help our team set clear goals and plans, Pete,” Harold said.

Before Doug arrived at NMTS as senior vice president, Harold reported to Pete.

“You need to bring some of that discipline to this team,” Harold said.

“No thanks! I am not taking Doug on over this one. I have enough scars on my back from his hobnail boots ...”

“Did they have multi-color mirrors on them like in the Beatles song?” Rosie asked, trying to lighten things up a little.

“Remember the issue with the Henderson Industries account?” Pete asked. “I tried to help him out with some input, and what thanks did I get? My budget was cut and two of my key projects were derailed. It cost me a good chunk of my bonus that year. I got the message. So, no thanks! Right now I need to save what’s left of my sanity.”

“We can’t go on like this,” Damali said. “It’s the tyranny of the urgent. I can’t stand the endless fire storms of crisis much longer. My department is burning out, and I am afraid we’re going to lose some of our best people.”

And you’re one of them, Pete thought. If Damali left, it would be a huge loss to the division. He noticed red streaks radiating from the pupils of her eyes. He had never seen her looking so tired and distraught.

“The project list needs to at least be sorted into critically urgent, extremely urgent, and really urgent,” Rosie said.

“Years back I would have thought for sure you’d be in Doug’s SVP role by now,” Harold said, gazing across his Coke at Pete.

Pete took a deep draught of beer. This is what he really needed to calm his jangled nerves. “Shoulda. Woulda. Coulda. Things just didn’t work out,” was his weak reply.

Chuck and Omar arrived and pulled chairs over to the table. “I thought today’s victim could use a drink and the consolation of the POETS Society,” Chuck laughed, patting Omar on the back. Omar could only manage a rueful smile.

“This morning reminded me of the scene in the Roman senate when the dictator Sulla asked for any objections to his proposal,” Chuck went on. “Ofella spoke up in opposition to Sulla’s plans. Without saying a word, Sulla motioned to his henchmen waiting at the doors. They carried Ofella out to

the courtyard and sliced off his head. Sulla then turned back to the senate and asked, ‘Are there any other comments?’ That pretty much took care of it. There was no further opposition from the floor.”

One of Chuck’s interests was ancient Roman history. Pete was sure it made him very popular at parties.

Damali offered sympathetic words to Omar on his initiation into the toxic culture of client services. She had an animated discussion with him about how deadly the atmosphere was in the division and just how critical his attempt to prioritize all the projects really was.

Chuck tried to comfort him too, saying, “Don’t worry, Omar – I’ll tell you some stories that will make you feel as if Dougie gave you a big hug and kiss this morning.”

“What we’ve all learned is how useless it is to try what you did this morning,” Rosie said. “There’s no point. So you just go along – and then you meet with your fellow POETS to straighten out the world. Welcome to the society.” She raised her glass to toast Omar.

“But he told me when I was hired that his style was all about consulting with his management team,” Omar said. “He has emphasized that over and over in the few months I’ve been here. His e-mail to us last week mentioned getting our input and ideas to deal with our big problems. I thought I was providing that this morning.”

“Doug talks a good game and can spout most of the latest management book leader-speak,” Rosie said. “But his idea of consulting us is to get our agreement on a course of action that he’s already decided on. He browbeats us into silence and takes that as agreement. When he asks for honest feedback, he’s really telling you to agree with him. He’s especially good at kissing up to those above him and kicking down those below. Welcome to the lower decks, my fellow POET.”

As conversation continued at the other end of the table, Harold leaned over to Pete and asked, “So why aren’t you sitting in Doug’s chair? You had it all going for you.”

“I don’t know. I guess after all I’d been through with Chantal, I just ran out of gas.”

“We could really use the old Pete Leonard, you know. You’re the best one to deal with Doug and get us out of this jam. You have a long history and a lot of respect in this company. And I’m not just talking about this team. Cy Garnet is a big fan too.”

Pete drained the last drops from his second pint. The familiar buzz didn’t seem to strengthen him this time. “Cy would never undermine or override Doug,” he said. “That would be the same as firing him. And as I said earlier, I am not about to try and take on Doug – especially given the warpath he’s marching down these days.”

“Pete, you’ve beat tough challenges before. Remember when you led our team through the impossible deadlines and corporate interference to deliver SCORPIO on time?”

Pete always smiled when he thought of how exhilarated and triumphant he felt the day SCORPIO – an innovative new client service plan – was presented at the annual general meeting. It was a stunning success by any standard and became one of the key contributors to NMTS’s steep growth curve.

“We go back far enough together for me to know just what leadership you’re capable of,” Harold said. “I don’t know how you’ve lost your way. I’m going to tell you this as a friend as much as a colleague, but it’s disappointing to see you in this state. For your own sake and ours, you’ve got to get back on track.”

“I’m not that guy anymore,” Pete mumbled. “Now I am just going along to get along. If we lie low long enough, this too shall pass. Assuming the company makes it through this

rough patch – and that I do too – I’ve got about seven or eight more years until my pension kicks in. I’ll still be young enough to move on and do what I really want to do. The truth is, I can’t afford to do anything at this point to jeopardize my job.”



Pete recalled a tense discussion with Michelle a few nights earlier after she read that day’s newspaper story about NMTS’s prospects.

“My teaching job is very secure, so there’s no worry about that income,” she had said. “But we would be in a real mess if you lost your job right now. We have very little money saved and still have this house to pay for. Since you’re getting close to fifty, you could have problems getting another job that pays as well as this one. And you wouldn’t have much of a pension, so you’d have to keep working for many more years. I am not sure your health could take that.”

Countless coffees at the office and a growing collection of empty pint glasses were catching up to Pete. Now the only relief he cared about was twenty steps away, in the men’s room. He excused himself and dragged his feet slowly in that direction. He felt the prescription in his shirt pocket. Maybe I should stop at the drugstore and get this filled, he thought – or maybe it’s time for another self-medicating pint. As he shuffled through the dim bar, he looked through the window and saw another torrent of rain soak the parking lot. Just then he remembered his umbrella. It was in the front seat of his car.

When Pete got back to the table, the conversation had turned to the organizational survey results. Everyone agreed that today’s declining work values and unrealistic expectations from many of the new workers was a big part of the

problem. The increasing turnover within client services was bringing many new people into the organization. They were just too unreasonable.

“What really frustrates me is their lack of initiative,” Rosie said. “They seem to be constantly coming to me looking for direction. So I have to spend a big part of my day babysitting.”

“I was surprised by the low scores – and some of the written comments were just downright cruel,” Damali said. “If they feel so strongly about some of these issues, why don’t they speak up? It’s actually a bit cowardly not to tell us directly what their gripes are.”

“And don’t they love to bitch and moan when they’re together?” Chuck said. “They should put up or shut up. The other day I overheard a couple of staff whining about a problem with another department. So I suggested they bring it forward to that group and do some problem solving with them. They told me there’s no point because the other group isn’t going to change anyway. Of course they won’t change if you don’t take some initiative to address the issues with them.”

The group continued, over yet another round of drinks, to bitterly denounce their weak staff, Doug, demanding customers, market conditions, and fierce competition.

“I am beginning to think that our luck is so bad that if NMTS went into the cemetery business, people would stop dying,” Damali said.

“Well, I am feeling better now that us POETS have given up all hope,” Rosie said with a laugh.

“After this morning’s meeting, I can see that NMTS’s office is really hell with fluorescent lighting,” Omar said. Rosie congratulated him on his poetic observation and knighted him with her straw, making him an official member of the POETS Society.

Harold contributed another saying. “In our division if you stoop you’ll be stepped on and if you stand tall you’ll have your head lopped off and handed to you by Doug.”

“Cheer up. The whole world isn’t against us,” Chuck said. “I think I know of some people and smaller countries that don’t care.”

Rosie looked at her watch. “*Oh my god*, look at the time! I’ve got to get going.” She put on her coat while others began to get up from the table. “Thanks for the misery of your company,” she said and headed for the door.

“I am glad I joined you today,” Damali said to the rest of the group. “This conversation has confirmed what I was feeling, and now I know what I need to do to preserve my sanity.”

Pete didn’t like the sound of that at all. He was just finishing the last of yet another beer when Heather walked over to the table. “Hi guys. Looks like I missed the party,” she said. “I wanted to join you earlier, but I got tied up at the office reviewing the survey with Doug.”

“I’m sure *that* was an inspiring time,” Pete said.

Harold pulled up a chair for her. “I was just about to mention Jason Reynard’s upcoming workshop to Pete,” he said. “Since you circulated the e-mail about it, you’re just the person to sell him on attending. I heard Jason speak a few years back at a conference. He’s got some good things to say on leadership that I think Pete would find helpful. I’ve been trying to wake up the old Pete Leonard that I know is still hiding inside that body somewhere. We could really use his leadership these days.”

“I have heard a few of the impressive stories about your key contributions to NMTS’s early success,” Heather said to Pete. “I think you would find Jason’s workshop very helpful. I attended one of his public workshops a few months ago and

I've read a couple of his leadership books. He's very good and his advice is quite practical. Would you be interested in attending?"

"I'm sure it would be beneficial, but I just can't get away for a whole day right now," Pete said. "Besides, Doug would be on my case about that too. He doesn't believe in soft stuff like leadership training."

"True," Heather said. "He isn't exactly enthusiastic about the workshop. But with Cy's insistence, he's supporting it. It's great timing to help you get some ideas for leadership improvement around the survey results."

They talked about the workshop and some of Jason's leadership principles over another round of drinks. Harold and Heather continued to encourage Pete to attend. He continued to insist that he was too busy. He was beginning to slur his words.

As they finished up, Harold said to Pete, "I've only had a few Cokes. Why don't you leave your car here and I'll drop you off at your place? It's not far out of my way."

Pete rose to his feet. He felt dizzy. "Yeah, I guess I did overindulge a little. Maybe that's not a bad idea. Thanks."

It was now totally dark. Harold's car sliced through wisps of mist and moved in and out of thickening fog. As they were turning down the road leading into his subdivision, Pete noticed a large four-legged shadow up ahead. It stepped off the grassy boulevard right onto the road. As they sped closer, Pete peered through mist and realized it was the cow or horse he had seen in the afternoon.

"Look out! We're going to hit it!" he shouted to Harold. That was the last thing he remembered as he raised his arms in front of his face and braced for impact.